

REVIEWS

A NOTE ON THE SPIRITUAL ASPECT OF SCHOLARSHIP

ST FRANCIS OF ASSISI: THE LEGENDS AND LAUDS. Edited by Otto Karrer; Trans. by N. Wydenbruck. (Sheed and Ward; 15s.)

From the mass of material that makes up Franciscan sources Mr Otto Karrer has made large and judicious selections to form a catena of representative excerpts such as, for the general reader and in a single book, may stand for the whole corpus of early Franciscan literature. And for the general reader he has, I think, admirably succeeded. There is little the reader will have missed when he has mastered all that is here given him from the *Legend of the Three Companions*, from Celano I and II, from Sabatier's and from Lemmens's edition of the *Speculum* and from Delorme's *Legenda Antiqua*, from St Bonaventure, from the *Fioretti* and from the Writings of St Francis himself. The whole has been clearly and readably translated by Miss Nora Wydenbruck.

Mr Karrer is perhaps a little ambitious when he claims that his collection forms a kind of Franciscan canon—he actually likens it to the New Testament! And his work will probably be of less use to scholars than he hopes. Essential to true scholarship is the independent judgment of a man who has read carefully *all* the original sources that exist; and the reader should be warned (which indeed Mr Karrer does not fail to do), that a book of not more than three hundred and twenty pages of English print must omit much that is pertinent to the fascinating problems of authorship and date that Paul Sabatier first set for our puzzling out more than fifty years ago.

Scholars too will raise an eyebrow at the complete confidence with which Mr Karrer identifies the *Legend of the Three Companions* with the lost legend of John of Ceprano, apparently mainly on the ground that Ceprano, as Bernard a Bessa tells us, began with the words *quasi stella matutina*, and two manuscripts of the *Three Companions* treat the same theme in a foreword. It is not unlikely that other lost sources began with the same words, for they are the opening words of the text from Ecclesiasticus of the Pope's sermon at the canonisation of the Saint. Their appropriateness made an impression, and they came to be identified with Francis; they have for many centuries formed the *Gradual* of St Francis's Mass.

But if Mr Karrer's reading is perhaps wider than his scholarship is profound, this has not prevented his offering us a quite competent introduction to each of the seven sections that divide his matter, together with notes upon each and a sound prefatory essay to the whole. The result is a thoroughly representative anthology of early Franciscan literature and a very fair setting forth of the main Franciscan literary problem, for that general reader to whom such books as this are principally addressed.

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The appearance of yet another book on St Francis tempts one to offer a note upon a subject that is highly relevant to the purpose of a journal like *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*—I mean the moral and spiritual side of scholarship. It is something that is never denied but never emphasised, because the emphasis is all upon the freedom of the scholar, upon his right to know all and to publish all he knows without fear or favour. But this very freedom surely involves a great responsibility to truth. The smaller the pressure he suffers from without the more the scholar is bound to control all within him that might substitute the desire of his heart for the plain truth as it is. Here, it is true, if men differ, it is mainly in emphasis; but the emphasis in practice often makes an enormous difference. All agree that the student—of history, for example—must be free and that he must be responsible. But which of these two comes first? Much modern writing would suggest that it is the freedom that comes first and that if a scholar is free to work out his subject in his own way, the truth is bound to emerge. It is the large manner of generous man-trusting Liberalism—and, to take only the course of Franciscan studies in the last half-century, it has had some curious results.

The story of the life-work of Paul Sabatier is very instructive. No man ever approached his subject with greater personal candour or with a greater desire to learn all that was to be known about St Francis; no man ever came to love his subject more than this very able writer came to love the *Poverello*. His eight years of immensely painstaking research and his growing love and admiration of Francis stimulated a very marked literary gift to the production of a book of rare power and beauty.

And yet, amid much enthusiastic eulogy, Professor Little in a quiet understatement can say of the book: 'There is a modicum of truth in (the) accusation' that 'to put it crudely Sabatier had read himself into his hero and had represented St Francis as a liberal Protestant of the nineteenth century. Sabatier discusses the question of objectivity and subjectivity at some length . . . "to write history" (he says) "one must think it, and to think it is to transform it. . . . Objective history is a Utopia. We create God in our own image, and we impress the mark of our own personality where one least expects to find it. . . . Love is the key to history".'

The historian of St Francis might have reflected that the God we worship infinitely transcends the poor image of him that we set up in our minds; that he is adored as Truth itself; and that love of Truth would be a better description of the key that unlocks the secrets of history.

Professor Little goes on: 'Sabatier was I think the first to recognise the paramount importance of St Francis's own writings as authorities for his life and thought . . . but I, for one, certainly did not realise from the *Vie de St François* the undoubted fact that the central subject of all the general letters of St Francis was the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ'.

Quidquid recipitur per modum recipientis recipitur. Sabatier wrote in the heyday of Hegelian philosophy. His was a voice straight from the quite enormous self-confidence of nineteenth century Liberalism. The picture of the thirteenth century that he offers us in his Introduction is exactly the picture we would expect from a liberal Frenchman of the eighties moulded (despite racial dislikes) upon Prussian thought and Prussian history. Its stresses and omissions, its contemptuous picture of endless thirteenth and fourteenth century wars and bickerings (written in that late nineteenth century lull that Progressivists readily mistook for the dawn of universal peace), his determined confronting of an exterior religion of Papacy and priesthood with an interior religion of the Spirit, are all in the best nineteenth century Prussian tradition.

'In the thirteenth century', he says, 'the priest is the very antithesis of the saint; he is nearly always his enemy. Set apart from the rest of men by holy unction, presenting himself as the ambassador of an Almighty Deity, able to accomplish unspeakable mysteries by certain simple actions, capable of changing bread into flesh and wine into blood with a word, he stands forth as a sort of idol who can do everything for you or against you, and before whom you can only bow down in trembling adoration. The saint on the contrary is one whose clothing proclaims nothing of his mission but whose life and words command the hearts and consciences of all. . . . Without charge of souls in the Church, he feels an interior impulse to raise his voice. A child of the people, he understands all their moral and material anguish. . . . These saints of the thirteenth century are veritable prophets. Like St Paul, apostles not by any canonical consecration but by the interior order of the Spirit, they were the champions of liberty against authority.'

Now Sabatier had already read and felt the significance of the Testament of St Francis. It is the most unsolicited and spontaneous, the most completely personal and self-revealing of all St Francis's writings; and near the beginning it contains this passage: 'The Lord gave and gives me such faith in priests who live according to the form of the Holy Roman Church . . . that even if they were to persecute me I would adhere to them. And if I had all the wisdom of Solomon and met poor little secular priests (*pauperculos sacerdotes hujus seculi*) I would not preach in their parishes against their wishes. Them and all priests I desire to fear, love and honour as my masters. And in them I will not consider sin, because I recognise in them the Son of God; and they are my masters. This I do for this reason, for in this world I see nothing corporally of the most high Son of God except His most Holy Body and Blood which they consecrate and which they alone administer to others.'

This is plainly to say that his spiritual life (what Sabatier would call his 'sainthood'), far from setting him in any kind of opposition to the clergy, was the very source of his deep attachment to them. This is the only meaning we can extract from the words 'the Lord

gave and gives me', etc., 'I recognise in them the Son of God', 'His most holy Body and Blood which they consecrate', etc. There is simply no question but that the attitude of Francis to the clergy was as different as it well could be from the attitude of Sabatier's 'saint'. The pains Francis takes to particularise his attitude are for us conclusive.

The sentence in which Sabatier describes the saint as the 'champion of liberty against authority' is ominous. Here Professor Little, who besides an admirer shows himself an able critic of Sabatier's doctrine, largely agrees with the biographer, and he describes an alleged struggle of Francis with the Ministers over 'power and authority' as 'a gallant attempt to include in the Rule itself an assertion of the rights of the individual conscience within a community'. Francis was immensely occupied with the freedom of the subject to observe the Rule in absolute poverty, even against relaxing Ministers: but there is not a particle of evidence to show that he was interested in freedom in the abstract, freedom as an end in itself, in the manner of some of his modern admirers. For him, the end and purpose of the human spirit was subjection to and union with God; and freedom was essential to this, for only in freedom could a spirit give itself to God. We are back at the question— which comes first, the liberty or the service of God? For Francis there could of course be only one answer—God and His service undoubtedly came first and the freedom was but the indispensable means to that end. It is a little one-sided to write as though a man exercised the freedom of his conscience when he defied authority and not when he obeyed it.

Of obedience, Francis in the Testament says: 'It is my firm purpose to obey the Minister General of this fraternity and the Guardian he may choose to give me. And I wish to be so much a captive in his hands that I can neither move nor act beyond obedience and his will; for he is my master'. A strange pronouncement of one who was 'the champion of liberty against authority'.

There is more that might be questioned in the fascinating *Vie de St François d'Assise* that took the world by storm in 1893 and became the starting-point of so much solid historical study; but enough has been set down to establish a thesis that in fact nobody questions, that scholarship needs more than exhaustive learning, endlessly patient time and application, vivid historic imagination and deep love of the subject. It needs a sleepless guard upon self, a great intellectual self-denial, a ruthless uprooting of even the dearest preconceptions, upon the demand of truth; in a word, it needs a great assertion of moral and spiritual integrity. This is sauce for goose and gander, and Catholic scholarship has sometimes shown itself peculiarly deficient in these very qualities. When Paul Sabatier realised some of the shortcomings of his work, he made whatever honourable *amende* he could. In an interesting lecture at Kensington in 1908 he says: 'Those who would rely on such passages in works of St Francis (those namely which assert his immediate

dependence upon God and the rights of the individual conscience, etc.) to make him a sort of forerunner of Protestantism, would be completely wrong. I know it is a reproach which has been made to me. If I have deserved it, I regret it, and I will try to repair my fault'. Not all of our Catholic historians have behaved so honourably.

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OF CLEAVING TO GOD (*De Adhaerendo Deo*). Attributed to Saint Albert the Great, translated with Preface by Elizabeth Stopp. (Blackfriars; 2s.)

This little work is a new translation of the Latin text written at the beginning of the fifteenth century, and formerly attributed to St Albert the Great. Though Professor Grabmann has returned to the traditional view of attributing the authorship to St Albert in the first instance, the tract in its present form cannot be his. The compilation, which contains a number of borrowed passages, is the work of a religious and a cleric, possibly of a monk of the Rhineland region, done for his own use. Whatever may be said of its origin it is strongly Dionysian in trend. The way to contemplation requires detachment from all earthly things, which in the concrete is to 'cast out of your mind the impressions, images and forms of all things which are not God; for once you have stripped your understanding, your heart and your will, your prayer will simply be looking upon God within you' (p. 17). One cannot help wondering whether this effort, involving as it seems to do a psychological contortion, is not liable, if self-imposed from without, to induce a state of mental vacuum akin to madness, unless there is at the same time an over-mastering influence coming from within when the soul has already become divinely impressionable through the Gifts of the Holy Ghost. There is always some danger especially in beginners of out-running the measure of grace, and therefore of failure by way of breakdown through excess. The premature attempt to darken the ill-instructed mind may and does end oftentimes in disaster. Evidently the cloud of unknowing is not the way for all and sundry, and the following of the way of negation implies a deepening of perception into truths already known. It is extremely difficult to see how certain aspects of the Incarnation are not emptied of their value and divine purpose when the use of the imagination is regarded as a waste of time. Not only St Thomas the theologian but St Teresa the mystic give due place to the imagination in the search for God. The liturgical worship of God in the life of the Church, with sacrifice as its centre, and the Christian materialism of the Sacraments and sacramentals, are agencies not only for hallowing the soul of man, but of arousing him through the senses and imagination even to the higher flights of the contemplative life.

1. See Paul Sabatier in Franciscan Papers, by A. G. Little.